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SUBJECT: READOUT OF EU HIGHREP SOLANA'S TRIP TO MIDDLE EAST
FOR PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS

Classified By: USEU POLOFF LEE LITZENBERGER; REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

1. (C) SUMMARY. EU Middle East Envoy Marc Otte told USEU that, as a result of his January 9-13 trip to the region, EU High Rep Solana sees possibilities and opportunities for positive changes in the election of Mahmoud Abbas as the new leader of the Palestinian Authority. In particular, Solana would like to take advantage of a window of opportunity before Palestinian legislative elections in July. Solana believes the U.S. has a critical role to play. On a positive note, Solana had a good meeting with Israeli PM Sharon, his first in a long time. End Summary.

2. (C) On January 18, EU Special Envoy Marc Otte briefed USEU in detail on EU Highrep Solana's January 9-13 trip to Jordan, Egypt, Israel and the West Bank/Gaza to observe Palestinian presidential elections and consult on Gaza disengagement and next steps to reinvigorate the peace process. The briefing was held at Otte's initiative, who said he had spoken to NEA A/S Burns on January 17, but wanted to provide further details and keep the U.S. informed of Solana's meetings and conclusions drawn from the trip.

Solana's meetings

3. (C) On January 9, Solana met in Jordan with the King, FM, and Security Services Chief. He then went to Ramallah during the Palestinian presidential vote, and met with the Central Elections Committee chief and had dinner with EU election observer chief MEP Michel Rocard. On the 10th he met with PA officials Mahmoud Abbas (after the results were announced), PM Abu Allah, and Dahlan, Rajoub, Fayyed and Erekat. Hanan Ashrawi set up a civil society roundtable, and Solana had lunch with Palestinian businessmen (and did the same in Gaza). In Gaza, Solana discussed Gaza disengagement and the refugee issue, and UNRWA's role, and took a field trip to two UNRWA camps. Otte said Solana was impressed with the "devastation" of Gaza, due to hostilities and the long-term impact of the refugee camps. Solana continued to Egypt, meeting with President Mubarak and Omar Suleiman. In Israel, Solana met with PM Sharon, FM Shalom, Dov Weisglass, and Mossad officials.

Key Conclusions: Elections show "political maturity"

3. (C) Otte said Solana drew three main conclusions from the successful PA presidential elections. First, the Palestinians took seriously the responsibility to hold credible, democratic elections. The PA's Central Election Commission (CEC) was "very professional," and operated as an independent entity with integrity. There were few incidents and no casualties. The Palestinian people took great pride in voting, and the 70% turnout was "higher than in many western countries." Otte said Palestinian voters were proud of the ability to hold democratic elections and, comparing themselves to other Arab countries, commented, "Where else in the Arab world do you see this?" Otte termed the elections a "remarkable example of political maturity." Furthermore, during the campaign PA President Abbas made key statements supporting a political settlement and opposing armed struggle. Hamas' call for a boycott went largely unheeded: it was clear that many Hamas sympathizers not only voted, they voted for Abbas. The elections, Otte said, were "a big lesson for the Arab World" in democracy.

Elections are beginning of a democratic process

4. (C) The second conclusion Solana had drawn, Otte said, was that the elections marked the beginning of a democratic process that must be supported and continued. With legislative elections in July, Fatah elections in August, and continuing municipal elections all scheduled for 2005, the process that began with the January 9 vote will be ongoing. The shortcomings identified in the January 9 vote will need to be corrected but, Otte cited EU election observer (and former French PM) Michel Rocard, these shortcomings did not effect the election outcome. Hamas is likely to want to field candidates in the legislative elections, and how the West responds will be a challenge. Otte said he expects Abbas to form a new PA government within two weeks. Abu Allah will likely stay on as Prime Minister -- and with the

full powers Abbas never enjoyed under Arafat.

Abbas' challenges, and opportunity for US-EU cooperation

15. (C) Solana's third conclusion, Otte said, concerned the challenges Abbas faces. First, he must translate the legitimacy of the vote to legitimacy on the street. To do this, Otte said, requires visible improvement in the lives of Palestinians between now and the July legislative elections. Israel holds the key, he said, and must be encouraged to lift the closures, allow freedom of movement and address the issues identified by the World Bank. Abbas, for his part, must establish law and order in the PA areas. If both parts of this equation can be met, Otte said, it would allow Abbas to relaunch the economy. This would be the best way to undermine support for terrorism.

16. (C) One example illustrates the challenge, Otte said. In the roundtable with Palestinian businessmen (some of whom had U.S. passports), Solana was told that it takes longer and costs more to ship a container from the West Bank to Gaza than it does to ship the same container from Berlin to Gaza. Otte said that Israeli officials whom Solana subsequently met also acknowledged the need to address the issue of movement and trade.

17. (C) The second challenge for Abbas is to establish a more efficient PA government. The EU has proposed that Abbas establish permanent offices for himself as President and for the Prime Minister and other key cabinet officers in order to organize follow-up and implementation of policy. Otte suggested the U.S. and EU could work together to support this requirement.

Solana's message on Terrorism

18. (C) Otte said that Solana, in his meetings with Abbas and other PA officials, spoke out strongly on security. He insisted that the PA take action to curb terrorist violence. He told Abbas that he could not build a state on a culture of violence. Palestinians face a choice between a civil or military path. Suicide bombings are a mistake, and have not been condemned strongly enough. Otte said Solana also reiterated a theme he had previously presented to Arafat: that Palestinians must understand the meaning of 9/11 for the U.S. and of 3/11 for Europe. These attacks had fundamentally changed Western views on terrorism, and there was zero tolerance for terrorist attacks on civilians. Otte said many of Solana's Palestinian interlocutors commented that this issue was now on the minds of many in Hamas, and was creating tension between those who continued to support suicide bombings and those who opposed it on grounds that it undercut international support for the Palestinian cause.

Israel: Sharon determined, relaxed

19. According to Otte, Solana thanked Sharon for facilitating the January 9 vote. Sharon was "determined and relaxed" Otte said, and told the EU envoy there was "no doubt" that he would go ahead with Gaza disengagement, despite the difficulties of Supreme Court challenges, cabinet approvals, budget deadlines, potential settler violence, and discipline problems in the army, many of whose soldiers come from settler families. Otte said Sharon made a strong case for why the PA must halt terrorism: Sharon cannot uproot settlers while under terrorist attack. If, however, the PA took action on security (the meeting took place prior to the Karni attack), Sharon said he was prepared to coordinate the disengagement with the PA, meet with Abbas, resume security cooperation, and resume the process leading to Israeli withdrawal from PA areas. Sharon said he looked to the international community (read the EU) to take responsibility for improving economic conditions in the territories, and noted in particular the need for foreign direct investment.

Sharon: Hizballah, Iran are key concerns

10. Otte said Sharon cited Hizballah and Iran as key security concerns for Israel. He was not, Otte said, critical of the EU-3 approach to Iran, but asked rhetorically "where does engagement get you?" Otte said Solana responded that there were three options: military action, do nothing, or engage. The EU ruled out the first two, leaving diplomacy as the only option. The EU has no illusions that engagement will succeed, Solana reportedly told Sharon, but while negotiations continue Iran will have to take steps to prove its goodwill. This will allow enhanced and more intrusive inspections. The alternative would shut out inspections completely. Otte claimed that Solana's Mossad interlocutors acknowledged that the EU assessment was "probably right," and they expressed interest in a continued exchange with the EU on Iran.

EU-Israel: Dialogue Improving

11. (C) Otte said all of Solana's Israeli interlocutors stressed the importance they attached to the recently-agreed

EU-Israel Action Plan under the EU's new European Neighborhood and Partnership Initiative (ENPI). Israeli Trade Minister Olmert will travel to Brussels in early February to follow up on the Action Plan and to launch a strategic dialogue on regional issues.

Egypt: Enhanced border presence, working on ceasefire

12. (C) Otte said Solana sensed renewed Egyptian energy to facilitate Gaza disengagement in his meetings with President Mubarak and Security advisor Suleiman. Egypt is waiting for the Israelis to come to Cairo to finalize an agreement on redeployment of a more robust Egyptian border force. Egypt is casting the effort as a response to a global need to improve border control post 9/11, and is also concerned about smuggling in the Sinai, not just in Gaza. Egypt wants to combine its enhanced border presence with training of PA police in Egypt and a physical Egyptian training presence inside Gaza. Mubarak hinted to Solana that Egypt already has a low-key "civilian" security presence in Gaza. Suleiman said he was working on coordinating a ceasefire and hoped to have all the pieces come together in March. Mubarak said Sharon must give Abbas "room for maneuver," and added that he planned to send his FM to Israel soon.

Jordan

13. (C) Otte said they heard a similar message in Jordan, although Abdullah was more preoccupied with events in Iraq and was taking a lower profile on Palestinian issues. Nevertheless, the King told Solana he was ready to send back to the West Bank the "Badr Brigade" that had trained in Jordan. Abdullah also expressed interest in having more interaction and dialogue with the Quartet, and said he is exploring with other Arab leaders how to appeal directly to Israeli public opinion to build support for a negotiated settlement.

Arabs: Distracted by Iraq and other issues?

14. (C) Solana also met with Arab League representatives, and Otte said it was striking the extent to which all of Solana's Arab interlocutors were distracted by other regional issues. Although Arab League FM's are discussing how to re-energize the Saudi's "Beirut Plan" to promote an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, Iraq is increasingly eclipsing Palestine as the number one Arab issue. Egypt is pushing Sunni parties to participate in the Iraq elections, or at least in the subsequent constitution-drafting process. The Arab fear, Otte said, is a Sunni-Shia conflict in Iraq fostered by Iran, and Mubarak spoke of the need "for Iraq to remain, at least, a confederation." Mubarak was concerned that assertive Kurdish and Shia populations would leave Iraq less of an "Arab country." Mubarak lamented that the U.S. had not listened to him when he warned against disbanding the Iraqi military and Ba'ath party structure so quickly.

15. (C) The trend, Otte said, is that Arab unity on the big issues is breaking up. In addition to growing concern over Iraq, the Arab world is increasingly looking in diverse directions, all of which point away from Palestine. The Gulf countries are worried about the challenge and threat posed by Iran; the North African countries are increasingly focused on improving ties to the EU under the latter's new Neighborhood initiative, and; Egypt is looking south toward Africa, with one eye on a possible permanent seat on the UNSC. Middle East Peace is becoming "less of a common cause," Otte said, noting that this will make it harder to mobilize Arab assistance for Palestinian reform and Gaza reconstruction.

Purpose of March London Conference?

16. (C) Otte said the Arabs Solana met were uncertain of the purpose of the UK's March 2 London Conference, and were concerned it would be used to beat up on the PA for not doing enough on security "once again." Otte, who said he was also unclear about the purpose of the London conference, said he had discussed this with NEA A/S Burns, who had received some clarifications from the UK, and had encouraged the UK to contact Arab countries directly to set the record straight.

Otte trip to U.S. early February

17. (SBU) Otte said he has been invited by Martin Indyk at Brookings to participate in a conference in Washington early February. He would be free for meetings with U.S. officials all day March 1, and on the margins of the conference March 2-3. He said his assistant would pass to USEU further details, and he would appreciate help in scheduling meetings at State, the NSC (Elliot Abrams), and the Hill (Lieberman, Wexler, and Biden). (USEU has emailed EUR/ERA and NEA/IPA with details on the visit.)

Otte Looks Ahead

18. (C) Solana completed his trip just before the Karni

terrorist attack, so Otte's readout reflects only the situation prior to that incident. Otte said Sharon refused to be drawn out about his post-Gaza disengagement strategy, and kept discussion focused on immediate next steps. Otte opined that Sharon intends to carry out Gaza disengagement and then hold elections. In response to our questions, Otte said he was pleased with the level and frequency of U.S.-EU communication, and valued greatly his contacts with NEA A/S Burns, Amb. Kurtzer and CG Pearce and others involved in the peace process. Looking ahead, he saw potential challenges for the U.S. and EU over continued settlement growth and expansion in the West Bank. "It's not just the number of apartments in any one settlement; it's the increased network of roads and infrastructure that criss-cross the West Bank, making creation of an integral Palestinian state almost impossible," he said. The barrier also posed a long-term problem, he added, with those settlements located between the barrier and the green line continuing to "fill in the gaps" and create a de facto new border that will remain even should the barrier be removed.

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